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Politics and People

BY THOMAS O'NEILL

Master Spy

Washington. Opinion in the capital about the choice of John A. McCone as director of the Central Intelligence Agency tends to be reserved. It is an oddity in a city where judgments on men and affairs are commonly to be had on an instant basis. The hesitancy traces largely to uncertainty about the kind of job Mr. McCone is supposed to fill.

Hints persist that substantial shifts in the functions of the hush-hush agency are to be inaugurated along with the change of command in November.

In one version, the overhaul would take from the CIA its present responsibility for deciding the meaning of the information it gathers and transfer that delicate function to a new official in the White House. The need at the agency would then be for a tough administrator, a description which by common consent fits Mr. McCone.

Most of the criticism of the agency, especially in the wake of the Cuban fiasco, stemmed from its dual role of collector of intelligence and appraiser of the information collected as a guide to policy. The complaint was that this system offered too much temptation to unconscious tailoring of facts to fit preconceptions of what policy ought to be.

It is in this respect that questions are raised as to the suitability of Mr. McCone for direction of the CIA under its present mode of operation. He is a man of strong opinions. Still remembered in some quarters is the 1958 protest of ten faculty members of the California Institute of Technology, of which Mr. McCone was then a trustee, that he had demanded their dismissal after they spoke out in support of a moratorium of nuclear weapon testing. Mr. McCone was then chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission and an advocate both of continued testing and of a tough policy toward the Soviet. The moratorium was later ordered over his objection, and continued until the Russians renewed tests.

Reservations regarding Mr. McCone, an amateur in the spying business, would probably be lifted if the White House divided the responsibilities the CIA has acquired in the fifteen years since it was created as the nation's first permanent intelligence

He would then provide administration of the assembling, overtly and clandestinely, of information. President Eisenhower's Advisory Committee on Intelligence Activities was critical of the executive talent of the outgoing director, Allen W. Dulles, who preferred personal operations. The eight years of the Dulles directorate were preceded by extensive experience in intelligence, but the organization seemed never to stop growing under his command. It has untold thousands on its payroll, and spends hundreds of millions without oversight of any kind. It is now moving into a massive establishment for at least 10,000 employees.

The director of the CIA is also chairman of the Joint Intelligence Board, which sifts the information gathered by the ten major intelligence operations of the Government, sums it up and advises the President on what to expect in foreign developments. Unless the appraisal is undertaken in coldly objective terms the information on which the President bases policy is likely to be slanted to fit a preferred policy. This appears to have been the case in the CIA's most abject failure, the Cuban fiasco.

Beyond its intelligence work, the CIA at times operates its own diplomatic service, subsidizes political movements abroad and engages in clandestine military operations—it financed and trained the Cuban expedition and selected its leaders.

President Kennedy has been described since the Cuban embarrassment as dissatisfied with the CIA as now constituted. He had a study of its operations made by a committee that included his brother, the Attorney General, and is said to have proposed that the younger Kennedy move into the directorship. Others were considered before the final choice of Mr. McCone, who has a record of hardnosed administration in a variety of Washington posts under Democratic and Republican administrations.

The selection has renewed speculation that a reworking of the agency is in prospect.

One possibility foreseen is a shakeup which would remove the function of assaying information from the CIA, but otherwise leave it much as it is. In this revision the function of evaluation would be transferred to a new staff attached to the National Security Council, which would have no operational responsibility. The CIA currently prepares for the National Security Council a weekly intelligence estimate that provides guidance for the top-level council.

Mr. McCone displayed foresight when he left the Atomic Energy Commission in January. He retained the house in which he had lived, apparently suspecting a new call to public service would be forthcoming. He would probably have become Secretary of Defense had Richard M. Nixon, a close friend, been elected President.